

Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L MOSCOW 1411

E.O. 11652: XGDS-1
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SUBJECT: MORE SHCHERBITSKIY RUMORS IN KIEV

REF: BONN 1470 (NOTAL)

1. SUMMARY: IN A CONVERSATION JANUARY 24, THE YUGOSLAV
CONSUL GENERAL IN KIEV REITERATED HIS CONVICTION THAT
UKRAINIAN PARTY LEADER SHCHERBITSKIY IS THE MAN MOST
LIKELY TO SUCCEED BREZHNEV. END SUMMARY.

2. THE KIEV ADVANCE PARTY (KAP) REPORTS THAT THE
SHCHERBITSKIY-TO-MOSCOW RUMORS IN KIEV, OFF-AGAIN, ON-
AGAIN, IN THE PAST EIGHT MONTHS, ARE NOW ON AGAIN, ACCORD-
ING TO YUGOSLAV CONSUL GENERAL SLAVOLYUB ALEKSIC. THE
YUGOSLAV'S CONTACTS TELL HIM THERE IS GOOD SUPPORT IN THE
UKRAINE FOR A SHCHERBITSKIY MOVE TO MOSCOW. ALEKSIC
HIMSELF ARGUES THAT THE UKRAINIAN HAS THE TALENT, EXPERIENCE
AND THE CLOSE BREZHNEV TIES THAT MAKE HIM THE MOST LIKELY
MAN TO SUCCEED BREZHNEV.

3. ALEKSIC OFFERED THE FOLLOWING CONCERNING
SHCHERBITSKIY'S APPARENT JOCKEYING FOR POSITION:

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A. THE YUGOSLAV HAD ASKED SHCHERBITSKIY PERSONALLY
IN A JUNE 1977 INTERVIEW ABOUT THE STORIES HE
WOULD MOVE TO MOSCOW. SHCHERBITSKIY RESPONDED THAT
THERE WOULD BE "SOME SMALL CHANGES SHORTLY" AND
THAT HE "DID NOT KNOW WHAT MIGHT FOLLOW." HE DID
NOT DENY THE RUMORS.

B. UKRAINIAN COUNCIL OF MINISTERS CHAIRMAN LYASHKO DELAYED HIS JUNE 1977 TRIP TO YUGOSLAVIA EXPLICITLY BECAUSE OF EXPECTATIONS OF AN IMMINENT SHCHERBITSKIY MOVE TO MOSCOW. IN JULY HE WAS ABLE TO MAKE THE TRIP BECAUSE "THE MATTER WAS PUT OFF UNTIL THE FALL."

C. SHCHERBITSKIY'S AWARD OF "HERO OF SOCIALIST LABOR," PRESENTED IN SEPTEMBER FOR THE UKRAINIAN GRAIN CROP SUCCESSES, WAS ORIGINALLY SUPPOSED TO HAVE BEEN GIVEN ON HIS 60TH BIRTHDAY IN FEBRUARY 1978.

4. ALEKSIC INDICATED THERE WAS CONCERN EXPRESSED BY HIS CONTACTS OVER THE POSSIBILITY SUSLOV MIGHT BE CHOSE TO REPLACE BREZHNEV. WHEN KAP CHIEF MENTIONED ROMANOV AND KULAKOV AS POSSIBLE OTHER SUCCESSION CANDIDATES, ALEKSIC THREW IN THE NAME OF USTINOV, BUT HE APPEARED TO BE SPECULATING PERSONALLY.

5. KAP COMMENT: ALEKSIC HAS ONLY RECENTLY RETURNED FROM LEAVE IN BELGRADE AND HIS COMMENTS ON LEADERSHIP SUCCESSION ARE THE MOST CANDID WE HAVE HEARD FROM HIM. IT IS POSSIBLE HE HAD INSTRUCTIONS TO RAISE THE SUBJECT WITH KAP.

6. ALEKSIC HAS PROVIDED A FEW PIECES TO A VERY CONFUSED PICTURE REGARDING SHCHERBITSKIY'S FUTURE, CONFIDENTIAL

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AT LEAST AS SEEN FROM KIEV. IF HIS INFORMATION IS CORRECT, WE CAN POSTULATE THAT IN JUNE AND AGAIN IN THE FALL THERE WERE STRONG LOCAL "SIGNALS" OF A SHCHERBITSKIY TRANSFER TO MOSCOW. THE AWARD TO SHCHERBITSKIY IN SEPTEMBER MAY HAVE BEEN SOMEHOW CONNECTED TO THESE EVENTS. POSSIBLY THE AWARD WAS TO BE A PREPARATORY STEP LEADING TO A MOVE, OR PERHAPS IT WAS ONLY A CONSOLATION PRIZE. IN ANY CASE IT STRUCK US IN KIEV THAT THE CIRCUMSTANCES, ALL-UNION TELEVISION COVERAGE, BREZHNEV'S PRESENCE ALONG WITH THE FULL POLITBURO AND SHCHERBITSKIY'S CANDID PRAISE FOR HIM, SEEMED MORE THAN A GOOD HARVEST DESERVED, EVEN AN OFF YEAR. END KAP COMMENT.

7. EMBASSY COMMENT. SO LONG AS BREZHNEV'S HEALTH REMAINS IN QUESTION, RUMORS ABOUT SUCCESSION UNDOUBTEDLY WILL CONTINUE TO CIRCULATE AT A RELATIVELY HIGH FREQUENCY. WHILE SUCH RUMORS ARE ALWAYS OF INTEREST, WE ARE INCLINED TO BE SKEPTICAL ABOUT THE SUBSTANCE OF ANY ONE REPORT. WITH REGARD TO ALEKSIC'S VIEWS, FOR EXAMPLE, WE NOTE THAT ANOTHER YUGOSLAV OFFICIAL RECENTLY EXPOUNDED A SOMEWHAT DIFFERENT ANALYSIS OF THE CURRENT SOVIET LEADERSHIP SITUATION (REFTEL).

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